

# WAGNER SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND



Patron: Sir Donald McIntyre

## NEWSLETTER

### 2005 Programme Rings the changes

The Wagner Society of New Zealand programme for 2005 highlights another year of activity for its three branches. This year, not surprisingly, there is a move away from study of the Ring, although the first meeting in Christchurch will review the Adelaide Ring with the production's Loge, Christopher Doig, and Wellington is to watch extracts from the Stuttgart Ring in

May. Auckland's first two meetings of the year will see Tony Palmer's Wagnerian film on Wagner and all three centres will watch

the Waltraud Meier DVD. Heath Lees will present talks in all three centres while Les Holbarrow and John Pattinson will present introductions and talks in their respective home branches of Wellington and Christchurch. All in all another exciting year is in store.

#### Auckland

**Sunday, 27 February 7.30 pm**

Part 1 'Life of Wagner' with Richard Burton.

*Venue- Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.*

**Sunday, 24 April 7.30 pm**

Part 2 'Life of Wagner' with Richard Burton.

*Venue- Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.*

**Sunday, 22 May (time to be advised)**

AGM and DVD of Waltraud Meier.

*Venue- Please note the venue for this meeting to be advised*

**Sunday, 17 July 7.30 pm**

A Round-up of excerpts from some new Wagner DVDs.

*Venue- Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.*

**Sunday, 11 September (time to be advised)**

A complete opera, with dinner during the intervals. Start time will probably be 4pm.

*Venue- Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.*

**Sunday, 27 November 7.30 pm**

Wagner's Ring and the Life-Cycle of an Audience. Heath Lees gives a DVD-illustrated version of his lecture to the WS of South Australia during last year's Adelaide Ring.

*Venue- Music Theatre, School of Music, University of Auckland, 6 Symonds Street.*



#### Wellington

**Sunday, 6 March 4pm**

A performance of Tristan and Isolde on DVD introduced by Les Holbarrow.

*Venue- Massey University Theatre.*

**Sunday, 22 May 4pm**

Wagner's Birthday

Meal and DVD on Waltraud Meier and excerpts from the Stuttgart Ring.

*Venue- (To be advised)*

**Sunday, 24 July 4pm**

Tristan and Isolde. Music's Love-Affair with Ideas.

Presenter Heath Lees.

*Venue- Massey University Theatre.*

**Sunday, 25 September (time to be advised)**

The philosophers who influenced Wagner in his writing of Tristan and Isolde.

(Schopenhauer, Kant etc) presented by Les Holbarrow.

*Venue- (To be advised)*

**Sunday, 27 November (time to be advised)**

Christmas Party.

*Venue- (To be advised)*

#### Christchurch

**Friday, 18 February 7.30pm**

Adelaide Ring Cycle – looking back.

Christopher Doig will speak on his experiences as Loge for the Adelaide Ring, followed by a panel discussion directed by John Pattinson.

*Venue- 20 Pentre Terrace.*

**Friday, 8 April 7.30pm**

DVD on the life of Waltraud Meier followed by excerpts on DVD of her singing Wagner.

*Venue- 20 Pentre Terrace.*

**Friday, 20 May 7.30pm**

Mid-Winter pot luck dinner and BYO to celebrate Wagner's birthday (22 May 1813).

*Venue- (To be advised)*

**Friday, 12 August 7.30pm**

A Kaleidoscope of Tristans. Heath Lees introduces Tristan and Isolde and plays excerpts from today's range of video and DVD versions followed by Act I of the new Metropolitan production of "Tristan & Isolde".

*Venue- (To be advised)*

**Friday, 23 September 7.30pm**

Act 2 & 3 of the new Metropolitan production of Tristan & Isolde.

*Venue- Probably 20 Pentre Terrace.*

**Friday, 4 November 7.30pm**

Presentation with John Pattinson.

*Venue- Probably 20 Pentre Terrace.*

**Sunday, 4 December 6.00pm**

Christmas Barbecue.

*Venue- Tony and Janet Ward's, Shands Road.*

# Acclamation Rings out

On Boxing Day 2004, under the headline 'This won't make the cut', the London Sunday Times music critic Hugh Canning wrote his review of The Royal Opera House Covent Garden's Rheingold and the start of their new Ring Cycle. "To make a pig's ear out of one Ring cycle may be a misfortune, but to produce two looks like more than carelessness: it's a dreadful waste of resources and talent. That, alas, seems to be what operatic London is destined to achieve in the first decade of the 21st Century. After Phyllida Lloyd's pallid Ring visions for English National Opera, the Royal Opera launches its own version of the tetralogy with another botched staging of Wagner's Das Rheingold." This is the production that sees Bryn Terfel sing his first Wotan and Lisa Gasteen make her Royal Opera debut as Brünnhilde. Royal Opera Music Director Antonio Pappano conducts and his chosen collaborator, Keith Warner, directs the staging.

Canning continues: "What just about saves the evening from ignominy is Pappano's beautiful conducting – lyrical, pliant, sure in its grasp of the 'symphonic' structure. His orchestra rises thrillingly to the climaxes: the descent to Nibelheim, the apparition of Erda, the ascent to Valhalla. He's a great musical asset to Covent Garden, even if his theatrical taste stinks.

My disappointment stems from having recently experienced a more theatrically engaging Ring on the other side of the world, where the Opera of South Australia, in Adelaide, has just



*Bryn Terfel as Wotan in Covent Garden's Das Rheingold. Photo Clive Barda*

staged Australia's first home-generated production of the cycle. I went primarily to catch Lisa Gasteen's Brünnhilde. I had no expectations of the production, by the German Born Australian resident Elke Neidhardt. With her production designers she has created one of the most visually resplendent Rings of recent times, with spectacular use of water and fire, as well as fresh, witty insights into Nibelung drama. Her Rheingold, purposefully staged as the Ring's satyr play, is the funniest I've seen, with brilliantly timed interplay between characters. The Ride of the Valkyries, with boozing Rocky Horror amazons carousing raucously at a comic-fascistic Wunder Bar, was an unforgettable coup de theatre too.

What made Neidhardt's Ring so memorable however was not the expensive scenic feats but the intelligence and distinction of her Personenregie (direction of actors), qualities entirely lacking in Warner's effort. Neidhardt may have concentrated on (old-fashioned) narrative values, but her production looked modern and felt contemporary, in marked contrast to the stale Victoriana at Covent Garden. Gasteen's Brünnhilde, gleamingly sung for the most part and physically tireless, looks set to storm the world. At least she, and Terfel, are two things to look forward to in Royal Opera's Die Walkure next March."

In an article on Ring Cycles that previewed the Covent Garden Ring, Paul Levy wrote in the Times: "At Adelaide we heard three splendid young Australians, Stuart Skelton and Deborah Reidel as the

incestuous twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde and Lisa Gasteen as Brünnhilde – and we'll be reminiscing about her to our grandchildren, just as my generation grew up envying those who heard Birgit Nilsson or Kirsten Flagstad."

But despite all the acclaim a story in The Sydney Morning Herald on 10 December, as the third cycle came to a close, brought opera in Australia back down to earth. After all the applause and rave reviews it seems that a good number of the Australian singers, from the Adelaide Ring, have no work in Australia in 2005. John Wegner who was such a sexy Alberich is headed for Europe as he has no engagements with Australian Opera this year. The Herald continued: "Others packing their passports include Stuart Skelton; Liane Keegan who will perform first Norn in ENO's production of Twilight of the Gods in April; Jonathan Summers who is going to Welsh National Opera and Opera North. Deborah Riedel and Elizabeth Campbell have been given a small amount of work but according to the Herald "The lack of Australian engagements has led to consternation behind the scenes but few are prepared to speak out." One who was prepared to comment was Lisa Gasteen. "There are certain singers in the Ring who are at their peak and are not being heard here....One thing I do know is there are a lot of very disappointed and disheartened singers who are trying not to be bitter about it."

Despite being left out of Opera Australia's plans for 2005 the artists are revelling in the audience response. "I haven't seen an audience in Australia react the way they did," Gasteen says. "Two thousand-odd people sprang to their feet on opening night. At the end of the second cycle, they did it again and would not go – they didn't want to leave. It's such a bittersweet thing for the performers to know that this excitement is possible and it's over. It's looking into the abyss for some of them."

It seems wrong to end a report on such a successful venture on a sour note. So I'll give the last word to a German publication, the Frankfurter Allgemeine, for it is after all German culture that was being performed! "There is a fission of beach party thrill about the Ring in Adelaide, a grand celebratory excitement of a magnitude that world-weary Bayreuth could not dream of."

**Christopher Brodrick**

*Acknowledgements: The Times & Sunday Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Frankfurter Allgemeine, theoperacritic.com and Clive Barda (photos)*



*Covent Garden's Alberich (Günter von Kannen) in Das Rheingold. Photo Clive Barda*

# New Tristan book strikes the right chord

*Tristan and Isolde, Wagner's most religious work? Christopher Brodrick tackles a new book that says just that!*

2004 was all about Der Ring des Nibelungen, so when Christmas was over and thoughts drifted to what books to take away, I was determined to leave Wotan, Siegfried, Brünnhilde et al 'on the shelf' so to speak. I picked as my serious read a book I had purchased in the middle of last year, Death-Devoted Heart – Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan & Isolde by the English writer and philosopher, Roger Scruton.

I came across it on one of my forays into Amazon and thought it would provide invaluable information on this most important of all operas. At 246 A5 pages it doesn't present itself as an indigestible tome and a quick read of the fly leaf interested me. "In Death-Devoted Heart Roger Scruton argues that Tristan und Isolde has profound religious meaning. Blending philosophy, criticism and musicology, he shows the work is as relevant today as it was to Wagner's contemporaries. Scruton's analysis touches on the nature of tragedy, the significance of ritual sacrifice, and the meaning of redemption."

The reviews were also encouraging:

*"A fascinating book, conveying his ideas so effectively he almost makes us hear the music . . . Scruton is full of engaging subtleties written with his customary clarity and concision."*

George Walden, *The Sunday Telegraph*

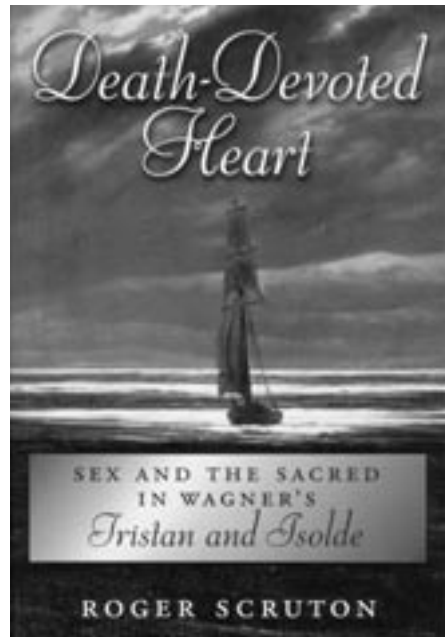
*"A study of the most important single composition in Western music . . . Scruton's examination is highly original and delves into aspects which have seldom been explored so rigorously."*

Peter Porter, *The Independent*

And writing in the New Statesman Michael Portillo: *"The Wagner scholar Michael Tanner described Tristan und Isolde as one of "the two greatest religious works of art of our culture". The comment might seem puzzling. Divine intervention, religious rituals and direct mentions of God are all absent from the opera. Instead it offers us forbidden love, betrayal and extremely erotic music. Yet Roger Scruton, in this highly detailed study of the work, argues strongly that it is "one of Wagner's majestic attempts to articulate the idea of redemption in artistic and dramatic form". I was convinced!*

When it arrived a quick browse convinced me this was indeed a 'serious' book. With chapters on

- Wagner and Religion
- The Story of Tristan



- Wagner's Treatment of the Story
- The Music of Tristan
- The Philosophy of Love
- Tragedy and Sacrifice Love, Death, and Redemption
- Epilogue: From Death to Ritual

And it deserved a little more concentration and time than Dan Brown! It was put to one side to be read at the beach. (On the subject of Bach, the St Matthew Passion was the other of the two 'greatest religious works of art of our culture'.)

As I settled down to read, it did not take long to realize that this book would require a little bit more effort than most. On the third page (page 5) I was confronted with 'Myths are set in the hazy past, in a vanished world of chthonic forces and magniloquent deeds. But this obligatory "pastness" is a heuristic device.' Well for those of us 'bear(s) with little brain' those are three big words that come very close together and early in the book. But then I kept saying to myself, Wagner operas require that same sort of work, and think how rewarding they are! So my advice: keep a dictionary at hand! But once you're into it this book is a fascinating read. Be prepared to think outside your comfort zone and Scruton will open up whole new vistas of thought. His treatment of the story and his analysis of the music, including a table of 46 motives, will provide invaluable reference for years to come. Also of interest are the chapters on the Philosophy of Love, where he provides an insight into the nature of erotic love and the peculiar place of the erotic in our culture, and Love Death and Redemption in which he convincingly argues that Tristan und Isolde is a religious work.

For anyone who is serious about learning the inner meaning of this great opera, Scruton's Death-Devoted Heart is a must. Don't be put off by the need for a dictionary. It does us good to stretch our minds and remember that one doesn't have to devour it in one go. I'll go back and re-read chapters just as I go back and listen to the music.

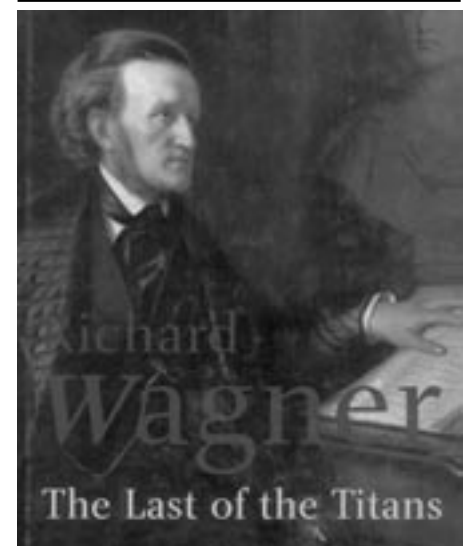
Finally to save you from putting down the newsletter to search for a dictionary:

Chthonic: relating to the underworld as described in Greek mythology;

Magniloquent: using impressive words and an exaggeratedly solemn and dignified style;

Heuristic: relating to or using a method that encourages learners to discover solutions for themselves.

All three are appropriately Wagnerian!



Yale University Press have just released a new biography on Wagner, The Last of the Titans by Joachim Köhler (translated by Stewart Spencer). If anyone has it and would like to provide a review please contact me at [cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cbrodrick@xtra.co.nz).

## Thank you

This message of thanks arrived just too late for the December Newsletter.

Dear Liz and Heath,

*Since you've been back home, lots of your lovely members have written to us to thank us for our Day. Days One and Two were certainly successful - here's hoping for Day Three. No Siegfried Idyll this time as the students have gone. I'm wondering whether you could spare us a line in your next Newsletter to say how much we enjoyed having the Kiwi contingent and thanking those who have written to us?*

Marian May Frost (Wagner Soc of Sth Aust.)  
[fricka@chariot.net.au](mailto:fricka@chariot.net.au)

(Now there's a true Wagnerian! - Ed)

## New Wagner DVDs

Whenever discussions take place about productions of the Ring the question is inevitably asked as to why the Kupfer production from Bayreuth, currently available on video, has not been released on DVD. Many of us have hoped that one day we'd be able to see a little more detail than the murky video allowed.



It would seem that our wishes will soon be granted, although in not the way we had anticipated. On 31 January Opus Arte will release Harry Kupfer's production of Das Rheingold, filmed at Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu in 2004 with Falk Struckman (Wotan), Graham Clark (Loge) and Günter von Kannen (Alberich). There is no information to say if or when the remaining operas will be released but it would be very strange if they weren't to come out during 2005.

For those who like their Wagner in traditional settings the Metropolitan Opera, James Levine / Otto Schenk production of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg has just been released. As usual with operas from the Big Apple the cast list contains a number of big name singers. Ben Heppner is Walter, James Morris: Hans Sachs and Katita Mattila: Eva. In addition Thomas Allen sings Beckmesser and Rene Pape: Pogner.



Also just released is a production of Tannhäuser from EMI. This 2003 production from the Opera House Zurich, is directed by Jens-Daniel Herzog and conducted by Franz Welser-Möst. Peter Seiffert sings Tannhäuser, Solveig Kringelborn: Elisabeth, and Roman Trekel: Wolfram van Eschenbach.

All three of these DVDs are available over the internet from Amazon or could be ordered from your local supplier.

## Engaging With The Ring

*One of the wonderful aspects of a Ring in Adelaide was that there was always plenty to do. From a Day with the Wagner Society of South Australia, to exhibitions and recitals we were not left wanting. Some, as Helen Chambers reports, spent the day on the couch!*

On Thursday 18 November 2004, The Australian Psychoanalytical Society presented a seminar, 'Engaging with the Ring.' The ballroom of the Radisson Playford Hotel, North Terrace Adelaide, was exactly the right venue for their seminar.

The hotel itself had the type of Art Nouveau grandeur that the squatocracy of Adelaide would have felt matched their desired position as the pinnacle of their society. As later in the psychoanalytical discussions, the words grandiose and narcissism were frequently used, these words were not out of place, in such a grand setting.

Though the building itself has undergone changes in decor that were some what dissonant with the original concept, there was something engaging about its atmosphere, as I like things to not balance or feel too comfortable. Dissonance and change were in keeping with the themes of the seminar, especially when it came to discussion with regard to the music.

In 'Engaging with the Ring', there were five presenters providing a personal view of the Ring from their own professional training and perspective. Over the review I will present what I learnt and took away from this seminar. This is a personal view and I will have missed bits and got some points not at all correct, as so much was covered.

The first presenter was Peter Bassett, whose presentation was called, 'From Page to Stage: Interpreting the Characters of the Ring'. Peter is a Dramaturg. He has been a diplomat for most of his working life and a lover of Wagner's music since a child.

In his address he looked at Wagner's philosophical world view and how it had radically changed over the 25 years he took to complete the Ring. 'From Page to Stage,' describes the role of a Dramaturg whose place it is to inform the directors and artists about the characters and their motivations. There are inconsistencies in the Ring, that just have to be accepted he said. Some people who cannot stand "cognitive dissonance" feel annoyed about things not adding up or things left out. This is another type of dissonance in the Ring

Wagner's philosophical stance is a metaphysical one. He is concerned with the inward issues of the human being. It is these metaphysical issues that are the engine that drives the Ring. How should a person or the Gods behave? Should they follow the path of power and artifice like Alberich, Hagen and Wotan or should they follow the path of love and nature, like Freia, Brünnhilde and Erda?

Wagner, like others in his day, was rejecting Rationalist Philosophy and following the Kantian philosophical approach, viewing humans as emotional beings. Wagner, the artist, was presenting feeling and emotion via his music. Wagner believing that life should imitate art, used a mythological framework to present transformational experiences that occurred for the main protagonist Brünnhilde, as she realised that she had to disobey her father's Law and follow her own path, a path indicated by Sieglinde and Siegmund, the path of the passionate power of love, that would save the world.

The new religion of Humanity challenged the divine or religious rule of the Church and State of Wagner's time. These themes and other characters were discussed within the framework of Brünnhilde's change, with an inner wisdom born of love, which acknowledges the pain of human love, eventually having supremacy in the Ring.

Wagner has as the focus of the Ring, love between man and a woman. From this he extrapolated to humanity at large. His solution for humanity, being expressed via the universality of myth which is timeless and ageless, goes some way to explaining why Wagner's Ring still engages us today.

It was my impression, after comparing the 1998 and 2004 Adelaide Rings, that Peter Bassett's approach had a huge influence on the new production, especially as it related to the storyline. There was a greater clarity in the way the four operas worked together than in any other Rings I have seen. His influence could also be seen in the psychological insights, particularly Wotan and Brünnhilde. Finally the essence of the characters had an Australian, New World directness that, in my opinion, would have had a large degree of influence from Peter Bassett.

*Helen will complete her report in the next newsletter. There will also be articles on a new recording of Tristan, a 'steamy' Ring and a 'missing' opera that Vincent Orange has unearthed in the recesses of his own imagination!!!*